

## Exploring the unintentional impact of human resource management (HRM) policies on gender inequality in the Nigerian workplace

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### Abstract

This study delved into the role of human resource management in gender inequality, focusing on policies within the Ibadan Electricity Distribution Company (IBEDC). Examining existing gender-based policies, staff awareness, and perceived effects, the research applied a descriptive design and the Gendered Organisation theory. Thematic analysis of qualitative data from interviews with 27 employees and six management members revealed limited staff awareness of gender policies, with initiatives predominantly benefiting female employees. Recommendations emphasize gender equality programmes for both genders. Future research should scale up and cross-reference participant data with organisational HR policies for a comprehensive understanding.

**Keywords:** HRM, Gender Inequality, Gender-based Policies, Gendered work

### Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) is crucial for any organisation, with human capital being its most vital and contentious element. Effective management of this dynamic resource is essential for optimising efficiency. Organisational policies often reflect societal culture, potentially leading to sexist or racist characteristics influenced by the immediate environment. Workplace gender inequality has been a significant issue, with historical roots like the 1970 women's strike for equality in the United States and movements such as 'Me Too' advocating for equal pay. These advocacies have integrated gender considerations into organisational and political policies, including gender recruitment affirmative clauses. Consequently, many organisations aligned with international standards include gender equality policies as part of their HRM policies. This paper explores the issue of gender inequality through HRM policies, highlighting how these policies might inadvertently promote gender inequality within organisations. The primary objective of this study is the examination of the role of HRM policies in gender inequality, with specific objectives being the examination of staff's knowledge and understanding of gender equality/gender-based policies, and the perceived effect of these policies on them.

The challenges of workplace gender inequality are deeply embedded within HRM practices (Ogunrin et al., 2010). Wright (1994), cited in Staminsky and Son (2015), categorises HR policies into three types: codified personnel practices, decision-making applications of HR policies, and adaptations to specific scenarios. Gender inequality can be traced to biases within these policies and their applications. Employees may experience personal discrimination, including sexist comments, during HR practices and discussions, leading to lower pay, status, and opportunities, as well as psychological and physical well-being impacts (Borrel et al., 2010). Reskin (2003) asserts that inequitable practices persist when organisational structures permit them. The persistence of workplace gender inequality underscores a deficiency within HRM in enforcing gender-sensitive policies, necessitating HR managers to align company policies with international standards, eliminate discriminatory practices, and promote inclusion and diversity.

HRM practices include strategies such as recruitment, training, performance management, compensation, diversity initiatives, workforce health and safety, and succession planning (Mastracci & Arreola, 2016). Gendered work involves defining, organising, and

valuing work based on gender roles within sociocultural contexts (Chalmers, 2014), which can influence HRM policies. Gender inequality in HR policies occurs when performance metrics like face time disadvantage women relying on flexible work arrangements due to caregiving responsibilities (Acker, 1990; Glass, 2004). Aktepe (2020) highlighted HRM's dual role in gender inequality through practices and their gendered application. Positive discrimination, intended to balance gender representation, can inadvertently sustain inequality by not addressing underlying attitudes (Ushie & Oben, 2023; Anastasiou & Siassiakos, 2014). HRM practices can either foster or mitigate gender inequality but often perpetuate it within a gendered system. Biased recruitment, role allocation, unequal pay, and inadequate work-life balance support contribute to this inequality (Aktepe, 2020). Historically, men have dominated policy development, structuring organisations in ways that do not support women's career patterns or integration of work and family responsibilities (Martin & Barnard, 2013; Frome et al., 2006). Invisible male-dominated institutional cultures continue to marginalise women (Hicks, 2012).

Extensive literature on gender discrimination in hiring includes Becker's (1957) "taste-based discrimination" and theories of "statistical discrimination" by Arrow (1973) and Phelps (1972), suggesting stable discrimination proclivities (Keuschnigg & Wolbring, 2016). North-Samardzic and Taksa (2011) found that formal organisations perpetuate gender differentiation, reducing the efficacy of policies aimed at increasing women's senior management presence. They noted that company cultures often pressure women to conform to masculine behaviours while perpetuating gender inequalities. Despite some firms winning "Best Practice" awards, gendered cultures necessitate systematic approaches for women's advancement. Recruitment preferences and HR policies often disadvantage women, who are disproportionately affected by discriminatory practices (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). Educational achievements have improved for women, with significant enrolment in traditionally male-dominated subjects.

HR departments manage work and human capital, and their policies can perpetuate gender bias if not carefully structured (Reskin, 2003; Peterson & Saporta, 2004). Recruitment discrimination often assigns jobs based on stereotypical gender roles, replicating societal status hierarchies (Ogunrin, 2010). Gender discrimination varies by occupation, with women facing prejudice in male-dominated fields, especially in STEM, where they may hide feminine traits to improve job prospects (Yavorsky, 2019; Kubler, 2018). Gender-biased hiring tests further exacerbate inequalities (Hough et al., 2001). Promotion policies also contribute to gender inequality, with women facing barriers in companies with formal job ladders, leading to gender segregation and limited advancement opportunities (De Pater et al., 2010; Starmaski & Son, 2015). Agentic women are rated less favourably than men, and pregnant women or mothers face additional biases in hiring and advancement (Rudman et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2013; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Stamarski & Son, 2015).

The issue of HRM policies and gender inequality is multifaceted; an organisation's policy might not be gender-sensitive, these policies might exist but are not enforced, or those implementing them may lack knowledge of their stipulations. Gender inequality has been prominent in industry discourse, yet inequalities in gendered work remain insufficiently addressed, posing threats to the productivity and well-being of marginalised staff and the organisation. This study examined the role of HRM policies in gendered work inequality at the Ibadan Electricity Distribution Company, highlighting the function of organisational policies in either promoting or mitigating gender inequality.

### **The Gendered Organisation Theory**

The paper adopted the gendered organisation theory in explaining the role of HRM policies in gendered work inequality. Joan Acker's gendered organisation theory (1990)

highlighted that gender inequality is inherently embedded within organisations. Acker described gendered organisations as those where dichotomies like strength and weakness or control and emotion are patterned along gender lines, making gender inequality a fundamental part of organisational processes (Acker, 1990). Acker noted that the historical absence of women in influential roles established masculine behaviours as the norm, creating structures perceived as gender-neutral but inherently gendered. Societal norms linked specific jobs to gender roles, reinforcing a gendered division of labour (Acker, 1990). Acker identified five processes perpetuating gender inequalities: division of labour, cultural symbols, workplace interactions, individual identities, and organisational logic. These processes affected power dynamics, behaviours, and workplace symbols, either reinforcing or challenging gender divisions.

Central to Acker's theory is organisational logic—the principles and policies managers use to control the workplace. These systems, like job descriptions and work rules, can embed gendered assumptions, contributing to workplace gender disparities (Acker, 1990; Williams, Muller, & Kilanski, 2012). HRM's failure to fully understand and address these implications can perpetuate gender biases, further propagating inequality (Acker, 1990).

### **Methodology**

The study employed a descriptive design in investigating gendered work inequality within the Ibadan Electricity Distribution Company (IBEDC). This design allows for a comprehensive summary of specific events or phenomena experienced by individuals or groups. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the subject comprehensively, ensuring alignment with research objectives while accommodating respondents' personal experiences. Key informant interviews were also conducted with department heads and management team members to gather valuable perspectives. The study focused on three key departments within IBEDC: human resource management, engineering/technical field operations, and customer service.

IBEDC was intentionally chosen due to its substantial workforce size and the gendered characteristics inherent in the energy sector's labour dynamics. The selection of the study area was influenced by the company's prominence as a major electricity distribution entity in Nigeria, its geographical proximity to the researchers, and its gendered components of customer service and engineering.

The study population consisted of IBEDC employees, including select management members, engineering and technical field operations personnel, and customer service department staff. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 33 employees for in-depth interviews, ensuring a balance between male and female participants. Additionally, opinions were sampled from members of the management team to supplement the data gathered from interviews.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews and key informant interviews and analyzed thematically using ATLAS TI version 9.0 and descriptive methods, including ethnographic summaries. Ethical principles and guidelines, such as the Helsinki Declaration (1980), were strictly followed, with formal permission obtained from IBEDC management. Fundamental ethical principles, including voluntariness, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, non-maleficence, and objectivity, were adhered to throughout the research process.

### **Discussion of findings**

The study delved into the role of HRM policies in gender inequality within IBEDC, focusing on gendered professions like customer service and engineering. This approach ensured a balanced analysis, gathering data from both male and female perspectives. The study

met its objectives by examining staff's knowledge of HR gender-based policies and their understanding of these policies' role in gender inequality. It also explored the impact of policy communication on gender inequality. Findings are discussed using themes, quotations, and ethnographic summaries.

Table 1 (appendix) provides a comprehensive overview of participant demographics, aiding in understanding the study's context and participant characteristics. The study engaged 33 participants, comprising 18 males and 15 females from customer service, engineering, and human resource departments. The male-dominated nature of the electricity distribution industry was reflected in the participant composition. Participants primarily belonged to Generation Y/millennials and Generation X, with limited representation from Generation Z, silent generation, and baby boomers. The study focused on technical/engineering and customer service departments, ensuring gender-balanced participation in traditionally male or female-dominated areas.

Participants' employment tenure spanned various intervals, indicating many employees had been with the company since its government ownership era before privatization in 2013. Their roles ranged from department heads to technical engineers, customer service officers, mid-level, and senior managers. Educational qualifications varied, with more male participants holding Bachelor's degrees and higher national diplomas compared to females, suggesting a gender disparity in educational attainment within the sample.

### **Knowledge and understanding of HR gender-based policies in IBEDC**

To achieve the objective of assessing IBEDC staff's awareness and understanding of gender-based or gender equality policies, we conducted a twofold analysis. Firstly, we explored their awareness of the presence of these policies within the organisation, followed by the examination of the content of these policies and they were communicated to the staff.

#### ***Staff Awareness of Gender-based Policies***

Gender-based policies address various gender-related issues, including the gender pay gap, promotion, and recruitment disparities. They encompass HR practices from recruitment to remuneration and time off work, among others. Participants expressed diverse opinions regarding the existence of gender-based policies in the organization. Responses varied significantly, ranging from complete denial of their existence to acknowledgement of varying degrees of awareness or familiarity with gender-based strategies within HR policies. Some denied the existence of these policies but acknowledged the presence of gender-based strategies within HR policies. Others denied their existence but mentioned knowledge of informal gender-based strategies favouring female staff. Additionally, some participants admitted to the existence of these policies, indicating a spectrum of responses and levels of awareness or understanding.

I don't think so, I do not have any such knowledge. (**KII/M/Generation X/TECH & ENGR DPRT/HOD/June 2021**)

I am not aware of it; this question should be for HR as they are in a better position to answer that. (**IDI/M/Gen Y /CS DPRT/Manager/June 2021**)

There is no policy per se. It is an unspoken rule and a practice in a male-dominated industry to make preferences and inclusive strategies for

women. Informally, the staff is made aware of this unspoken rule of gender equality. (KII /F/Gen Y /CS<sup>1</sup> DPRT/Senior Manager/June 2021)

There is no one policy for gender equality in IBEDC. What happens is, gender equality strategies are included or embedded in every other policy. (KII /M/Gen X/HRM DPRT/Senior manager/June 2021)

Yes, there is an organisational policy on gender and I am aware of it and my staff are as well. The dictate is to give preference to female staff and also give them support to help their development. (KII /M/Generation X/TECH & ENGR DPRT/HOD/June 2021)

Yes, there are policies. Actually, the company is partnering with USAID on gender equality programs. One such strategy of the policy is capacity building for women. (KII /F/Generation X/TECH & ENGR DPRT/HOD/June 2021)

It is evident from the responses provided that there is a communication gap regarding HR gender-based or gender equality policies. The responses indicate a lack of awareness of these policies and, in some cases, an admission of their exclusive nature favouring female staff. Overall, participants' responses suggest confusion regarding the existence and content of gender-based policies. However, the response from the human resource manager offered some clarity by explaining the absence of specific gender-based or gender equality policies. Instead, gender equality strategies are integrated into all HR policies within the organisation.

Furthermore, the lack of awareness of these policies by some senior staff, and their acknowledgment that such knowledge falls under the purview of human resource managers, highlights a lack of mutual understanding between staff and HR managers regarding the organisation's HR policies. This lack of mutual understanding and low awareness could significantly affect compliance with these policies, as individuals cannot adhere to policies they are unaware of or feel disconnected from. Confirmation from the human resource department confirms the presence of gender-based strategies, not policies, embedded in HR policies to promote gender equality across all HR practices.

There is a limited awareness of gender-based strategies within IBEDC. Participants ranged from being unaware of these policies to having only basic knowledge, often highlighting a preference for female staff. This perception of favouritism towards females may lead to gender-based discrimination against male employees. Additionally, it was also found that there is a lack of buy-in or mutual agreement among some participants regarding these policies, contributing to their lack of awareness and indifference towards them, which could perpetuate gender inequality.

### **HR Gender-based Strategies in IBEDC**

Study participants revealed the existence of gender-based strategies in IBEDC which were embedded into general HR policies. These strategies as illustrated in Figure 2 (in the appendix) have been grouped into themes namely; development and capacity building strategy, anti-sexual harassment strategy, and recruitment and inclusivity strategy.

#### ***Recruitment and Inclusivity Strategies***

The power distribution sector is a male-dominated industry. Its consideration as a blue-collar job which requires heavy lifting and strength has made it to be dominated by men. It can

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<sup>1</sup> Customer Service

be inferred from the sex distribution in Table 1 that there are more male workers in engineering and more female workers in customer service. These participants opined that it was the physically taxing nature of engineering and the nurturing and empathetic requirement of customer service roles that contributed to this disparity.

First of all, the cause of women being few in this area is due to the physical nature of the job. Engineering is a physical job, and I have noticed that it is easier for females to venture into the academic field because it is less stressful. **(IDI /F/GEN X/TECH & ENGR DPRT/Technical engineer/ June 2021)**

I feel women deliver more in customer service roles than guys. Women can handle pressure more and this makes them the preferred ones for the job. **(IDI /M/GEN Y/CS DPRT/ CS officer/ June 2021)**

However, some other roles and professions make up the organisations and carry out day-to-day functions including legal, compliance, HRM, customer service, technical, marketing and sales etc. The focus of this study in assessing gender inequality was on two gendered departments or professions within the organisation; the customer service and the technical and engineering departments. This choice was to enable a balanced assessment of gender inequality from the perspectives of both genders, from both male and female-gendered work.

The gendered aspect of this job contributes to the expectations and assumptions about the kind of candidate suitable for the job and this can contribute to gender inequality during recruitment from the manner of advertisement to the selection and job allocation. In IBEDC, there are some pre-emptive strategies put in place during recruitment to mitigate such issues, these strategies are discussed below.

### ***Gender-neutral Communication in Recruitment***

Communication is an important part of any society and words and expressions are major drivers of communication. It can convey messages and feelings but it can also conceal or represent prejudice. The use of words like 'manpower' or 'chairman' reflects a preference for male attributes and is non-inclusive. Study findings revealed that this was an aspect that was considered in recruitment and efforts were made to use gender-neutral words and expressions both during the advertisement for the role and also during the selection process. This is done to neutralise bias that may arise in the recruiters or even in the applicants as certain expressions may unconsciously paint a persona or attributes normally expected or found in one gender over the other.

In the area of language, each of the test instruments used is reviewed to spot unconscious bias elements. For example, on job Ads and even if I am going to be testing for a role, some of the expressions or terms used could be gender biased; as a female or male might be able to relate more to a question better than the other alternate sex. So, we try to eliminate these things from our test questions, making the recruitment panel gender-balanced. **(KII /M/Gen X/HRM DPRT/Senior manager/June, 2021)**

The excerpt illuminates the function of language in recruitment to conceal conscious or unconscious gender bias which can influence the recruitment process by attracting a particular gender or making the test process more relatable to a particular gender. This ensures neutrality and inclusivity in the recruitment process.

***Blind Recruitment and Gender balanced recruitment panel***

Findings from the study revealed the company employed blind recruitment and a gender-balanced recruitment panel as a gender-positive measure in recruitment. This involved the preference and higher rating on written tests over interviews and also on the part of the interviewers, the panel usually consists of equal part males and females, ensuring that both genders are represented.

Another strategy used is blind recruitment; when bringing in new entrants, we place heavy ratings on written tests as opposed to interviews. In our recruitment and selection process by way of quality, it has been instituted that a recruitment panel has to be made up of 50% males and 50% females. There is usually a four-person interview panel, so before the person gets to the final selection stage, they must have met with all the members of that panel either together or one on one and this helps to eradicate gender bias. (KII /M/Gen X/HRM DPRT/Senior manager/June, 2021)

The excerpt above indicates the use of blind recruitment which indicates the higher ratings placed on written exams over interviews during recruitment after the first selection, successful applicants go for the interview which is also positioned to be gender neutral as it presents a balanced gender representation to ensure that any possible unconscious gender bias is eliminated. Applicants either get to meet with the full panel at once or they are interviewed by individual members of the panel, but they certainly have to meet everyone on the panel before the selection is done. The aforementioned strategies are indicative of the HR manager's knowledge of gender inequality within the HR functions, hence their attempts at neutralising them.

***Affirmative Recruitment***

Affirmative action refers to policies and practices aimed at providing opportunities for marginalised and disadvantaged groups to promote inclusivity and address discrimination. Study findings reveal the use of this strategy in addressing the low volume of women being recruited into the company, specifically in the engineering departments, as indicated by this participant “We have just two female staff in this unit but generally, I have not noticed any different treatment.” (IDI /F/GEN Y/TECH & ENGR DPRT/ Tech officer/ June 2021). This strategy seeks to attract more women into the workforce to ensure a balanced spread of both male and female staff. This participant divulged that,

Another such strategy is in recruitment, they try to give room for more applications from women, especially in the technical department and they are also encouraged so they can get the job but without lowering our standard. For instance, when an advertisement is placed concerning a vacancy, and let's say about 100 applications are received, with 5 from females, we ensure that all five are invited for the interview and hired if they meet the requirements. This is a way to level up the quota of males and females. (KII /F/Generation X/ TECH & ENGR DPRT/HOD/ June 2021)

However, this does not correspond with the understanding of this participant who enthused:

Yes, there is an organisational policy on gender and I am aware of it and my staff are as well. The dictate is to give preference to female staff. (KII /M/Generation X/TECH & ENGR DPRT/HOD/June 2021)

Study findings revealed this practice in the organisation where females are encouraged to apply and since more applications are usually received from the males, those from the females are given preference to attempt to match those received from the males. However, there appears to be a misunderstanding among staff as to the gender-based policies and how they are to ensure gender equality. One opinion is that it is to give preferential treatment to female staff and this is contradictory to the opinions of some others as indicated by the excerpt above which talks about the affirmative strategy. Allowing for more applications from women to be considered should involve – as explained by some study participants - reaching out to more women in the recruitment pool and ensuring that the number of applications received from the females matches that received from the males, therefore this does not correspond with the notion of preferential treatment as that implies that the standards apply differently to both genders in the company.

### ***Inclusivity Strategy***

Although we have discussed this strategy as an aspect of the recruitment strategy it can also be discussed in the area of decision making and time-off-work. Study findings revealed that the organisation had introduced paternity leave alongside the already practiced maternity leave in the organisation. This reflects inclusivity as it ensures some level of work-life balance for staff, especially fathers of newborn babies. This strategy including its decision-making aspect was surmised by this participant thus,

Time off work is a privilege of every staff, i.e., the annual leave of 22 days, so no complaints there. However, there have been clamours for paternity leave. We have a condition of service which does not spell out paternity leave, instead, a man seeking to take leave to fulfil paternal issues upon the birth of a child can be granted compassionate leave. The new condition of service will be launched in June 2021 and it will include a provision for 1-month paternity leave and 4 months as against 3 months maternity leave also this adjustment of the leave duration was done with the input of women and not just drafted without their input. **(KII /M/Generation X/HRM DPRT/senior manager/June 2021)**

As regards sensitivity and inclusion, this participant further stressed that:

We try as much as possible to remove even in our languages those kinds of disparities so our men and even women can begin to settle into the fact that IBEDC is now gender friendly. For example, there is a role called 'lines-men' which refers to electrical engineers who work on the power lines, we changed it to 'lines-worker', and we also changed the use of 'manpower' to 'workforce' and many other things like that, all in a bid to change that mentality. **(KII /M/Generation X/HRM DPRT/senior manager/June 2021)**

It can be deduced that this inclusivity in decision making especially on issues pertaining to women has not always been a norm but a new development, same as the paternity leave for men. The inclusivity strategy ensures that there is gender representation and thus inclusivity in the decision-making processes of the organisation, this has ensured that the males get time off to attend to fatherhood responsibilities and the women get more time for theirs and were also involved in the discussions that led to that decision. Furthermore, another pro-inclusive strategy is the elimination of gender-biased terms which is a subconscious and subtle way of creating a more inclusive work space.



### ***Development and Capacity Building Strategy***

Training and development are an important HR function and one which ensures efficiency in work and thus output. Study findings revealed the premium placed on development in the organisation as emphasised by this participant “The company is committed to capacity development and there is a training facility at Iyanganku. Presently the learning and development department of the company is developing a learning management system for all staff”. (IDI /M/Generation Y/CS DPRT/CS officer/June 2021). Responses from both the customer service and engineering departments indicated that regular training and conferences were held for staff. This strategy also has an aspect of inclusivity as it pertains to both genders in its programmes and its capacity-building feature ensures that more staff, especially the females in the technical and engineering department, upskill and qualify for promotions.

It was previously pointed out the disparity in the educational qualifications between male and female staff with more males having higher degrees than the female staff. The development strategy attempts to address that situation by providing capacity-building conferences and seminars for women to bridge the knowledge and recruitment gap, especially in engineering. These participants disclosed that,

The company is partnering with USAID on gender equality programs. One of such strategies of the policy is capacity building. Women are encouraged to develop their skills so they can occupy positions for which they have the skills. Partnerships such as the one with USAID organize development and capacity-building programs specifically targeted at women to breach the knowledge and recruitment gap in engineering. Another strategy of breaching the gender gap in tech is career events, organized by the company where the female and male tech staff speak to students in secondary schools on the importance of choosing careers in STEM. This is aimed at increasing the number of women that will apply for jobs in the power sector in the long run. (KII /F/Generation X/TECH & ENGR DPRT/HOD/June 2021)

Women are given more slots and opportunities to participate in external events and men are overlooked completely. (IDI/M/Generation Y/CS DPRT/CS officer/June, 2021)

The knowledge and culture of the staff can cause gender insensitive behaviours, some of these issues occur most among those who have been with the company since when it was government-owned. So, we try to change that culture through acculturation through training, orientation, nudging and many other tools we have at our disposal to effect change. (KII /M/Generation X/HRM DPRT/Senior Manager/June 2021)

Currently, we are organising another D.I.S.C.O<sup>2</sup> Part of the policy implementation strategies is 'men engage'. This is the way men in IBEDC are being educated on how to welcome and deal with women in the company. (KII /F/Generation X/TECH & ENGR DPRT/HOD/June 2021)

From the excerpts, it is evident that the training programs at IBEDC are not only held internally but also organised in partnership with international organisations focused on gender

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<sup>2</sup> D.I.S.C.O – Discussion Issues Surrounding Career Opportunities – for women. See Okogba, E. (2022, August 26). *IBEDC partners USAID on promotion of gender equality, career empowerment for women*. Vanguard News. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/08/ibedc-partners-usaid-on-promotion-of-gender-equality-career-empowerment-for-women/>

equality. These initiatives aim to build capacity for females in engineering both within IBEDC and other organisations, and to attract younger females to STEM careers, particularly in engineering. This strategy seeks to increase the number of women in the labour talent pool for future employment. Additionally, the study findings highlighted the sensitivity aspect of these development strategies, where men are reoriented to be more inclusion-conscious and welcoming of female colleagues, especially in the engineering department.

However, a disparity was noted in the attention given to female staff compared to male staff, particularly considering the gendered nature of the customer service profession. None of these initiatives targeted attracting more males to the customer service field or sensitising customers or female staff to the idea of males in customer service roles. This oversight in IBEDC's HR gender-based policies may contribute to gender inequality.

This examination of development and inclusion policies somewhat contradicts Hicks (2012), who argued that invisible aspects of male-dominated institutional culture often give lip service to gender empowerment strategies while continuing to marginalise women. It can also be deduced that most development strategies at IBEDC focus more on capacity building for females, while those involving males concentrate on acculturation and reorienting them to better relate to female coworkers.

### ***Anti-harassment Policy***

Studies on gender equality have identified harassment and gender-biased language as significant causes of gender inequality, necessitating comprehensive organisational policies. Rodrigo (2015) categorised gender discrimination to include workplace harassment, such as sexual and verbal harassment, bullying, and incivility. Ushie and Oben (2023) further highlighted harassment as a form of gender inequality affecting both genders in gendered work. Acker's (1990) Gendered Organisation Theory emphasises that symbols, including language and ideology, can reinforce or challenge gender divisions. This study revealed that IBEDC enforces a zero-tolerance policy for sexual and verbal harassment, applicable to both male and female staff, as well as indiscretions with customers. This participant revealed that,

There is also the sexual harassment policy which includes both male and female staff. Both sexes when they default have been cautioned. We have actually fired people because they treated women unfairly. Last week we let one person go for a sexual indiscretion with a female customer, we demoted and switched someone's department also for that, and he had to attend a sexual harassment workshop after the demotion. (KII /M/Generation X/HRM DPRT/senior manager/June 2021)

It can be surmised that IBEDC maintains a stringent stance against all forms of harassment, as indicated by the anti-harassment policy. It is one of the policies that intersects with gender-related issues. It explicitly prohibits any sexual relations between employees and clients and also outlines a zero-tolerance approach towards any harassment, irrespective of its nature, among employees. The policy further emphasizes severe repercussions for violations, encompassing penalties such as demotion or termination.

In examining the gender-based strategies within IBEDC, four distinct measures were identified: the recruitment strategy, inclusivity strategy, development and capacity-building strategy, and the anti-harassment policy. The recruitment strategy encompassed initiatives such as blind recruitment, gender-neutral communication, a gender-balanced recruitment panel, and affirmative recruitment. Findings from the study revealed potential biases arising from non-inclusive language in recruitment communications, leading to the adoption of gender-neutral communication to mitigate such biases. Additionally, blind recruitment and a gender-balanced

recruitment panel, along with affirmative recruitment measures, aimed to ensure gender balance, neutrality, and inclusivity in the recruitment process. Notably, affirmative recruitment prioritised women applicants due to their underrepresentation in the engineering department, maintaining equal standards while addressing gender imbalances.

The developmental and capacity-building strategy primarily focused on enhancing the skills of female staff and promoting STEM careers for young women, thereby enriching the talent pool for future recruitment. While emphasizing the strategy's role in reorienting men towards inclusivity and supporting female participation, particularly in engineering, the study revealed disparities in attention between female and male staff, particularly in the customer service profession. The absence of parallel initiatives for male staff and the oversight in orienting customers and female staff towards male representation in customer service highlight potential shortcomings in IBEDC's HR gender-based policies, which may perpetuate gender inequality.

The inclusivity strategy implemented by the organisation extended beyond recruitment to decision-making processes and time-off work entitlements. Findings highlighted the introduction of paternity leave, complementing existing maternity leave, and the involvement of women in decision-making processes related to increased maternity leave duration, indicating a shift towards inclusive decision-making. Moreover, the removal of gender-biased terminology in the workplace promoted an environment of inclusivity.

The anti-harassment policy within IBEDC aimed at maintaining a harassment-free work environment by explicitly prohibiting all forms of sexual relations between employees and clients and enforcing a zero-tolerance stance towards harassment among staff. Severe penalties, such as demotion or termination, underscored the gravity of policy violations. While not specifically a gender-based strategy, this policy intersects significantly with gender-related issues, aligning with IBEDC's gender equality measures.

### **Policy/Strategy Communication Channels in IBEDC**

Policy communication plays a pivotal role in human resource management, dictating how policies are disseminated, the channels used, and the frequency of communication. Effective communication, coupled with feedback mechanisms to ensure comprehension, fosters unity and alignment within an organisation. Therefore, an examination of IBEDC's communication channels is essential for assessing members' awareness of gender-based policies.

The study revealed that IBEDC employs various communication channels to disseminate information, with policies and strategies following similar established routes during distribution. These communication channels, as illustrated in Figure 2 (appendix), include emails and newsletters, employee handbooks, official meetings, and informal conversations. This participant further surmised the policy communication channels thus:

When there is a new policy or strategy, the workers receive an email about it. There is also the monthly newsletter which is used in communication. In the case of a new employee, a copy of the company's updated employee handbook is given to them as part of the onboarding package and then when the person is placed, they have access to all the policies in the shelf folder which can be accessed on the employee's computer when they have received their working tools. **(KII /M/Gen X/HRM DPRT/senior manager/June 2021)**

Additionally,

Another means through which we bring this into view is through the IBEDC voice, we have a newsletter, a portion of it is dedicated to issues relating to gender and it is a wide-reaching medium as it is being circulated and all staff in the company have access to it. **(KII /F/Gen X/TECH & ENGR DPRT/HOD/June 2021)**

During meetings and informal conversations, they are made aware that they are to support their female colleagues. **(KII/M/Gen X/TECH & ENGR DPRT /HOD /June 2021)**

There is no policy per se. It is an unspoken rule and a practice in a male-dominated industry to make preferences and inclusive strategies for women. Informally, the staff is made aware of this unspoken rule of gender equality. **(KII /F/Gen Y /CS DPRT/Senior Manager/June 2021)**

The excerpts suggest that IBEDC employs various communication channels, including emails, newsletters, employee handbooks, meetings, and informal conversations, to disseminate policies to employees. However, there is a contradiction, as some employees claim the absence of a formal gender equality policy while acknowledging an informal preference for women, communicated through informal channels like grapevine conversations. Despite the formal communication channels used to inform staff about gender-based policies, the excerpts imply a disconnect in communication and knowledge of these policies among the staff, highlighting a potential gap in understanding and adherence to the organisation's gender-based policies.

### **Effects of HR Gender-based/Gender Equality Policies on Staff**

Policies have diverse consequences based on their objectives, the context in which they are implemented and so on. In the same vein gender-based policies can have varying effects on the staff. The effects of these policies/strategies on the staff of IBEDC as depicted in Figure 3 (appendix) are discussed in themes below;

#### ***Increased Female Productivity and Glass ceiling cracks***

Study findings revealed that the gender-based/gender equality policies/strategies had contributed immensely to female productivity in the organisation which equally had led to more women in leadership positions thus contributing to glass ceiling cracks in the energy distribution sector. This participant surmised this stating that,

The deliberate and specific drive for gender equality started in 2016 and, the reception and success have been tremendous, more females have been rising through the ranks. USAID has recognised IBEDC as one of the most advanced gender equality drivers of electricity utilities and companies in Africa. Our efforts with our annual conference which involves all women from within the company and those outside the company from all walks of life, called D.I.S.C.O.S (discussing issues surrounding career opportunities for women) has garnered international recognition enough so as to be awarded a grant from USAID. We want to be seen as an organisational advocate for women in energy. **(KII/M/Gen X/HRM DPRT/senior manager/June 2021)**

Based on the quotation, it can be inferred that the enhanced productivity of female staff at IBEDC is a result of the deliberate measures taken by the organisation to promote gender equality, particularly through its development and capacity-building strategy. Consequently, this initiative has contributed to an increase in the knowledge, skills, and productivity of female

employees, resulting in an increased rate of promotions. Other participants in accordance stated that,

There is no policy per se. It is an unspoken rule and a practice in a male-dominated industry to make preferences and inclusive strategies for women. This preference paid to women has led to an increase in productivity on the part of the women as they feel accepted, fulfilled and strive to be productive. This has also led to more women in leadership positions. **(KII /F/Gen Y /CS DPRT/Senior Manager/June 2021)**

The additional preference we show to the few women in our field has affected their work and growth positively, especially in this company. It has been effective as we have female engineers progressing through the ranks and we now have female managers in tech and female heads of departments in HR and Finance. **(KII /M/Generation X/TECH & ENGR DPRT/HOD/June 2021)**

Study findings revealed the positive outcomes of the gender-based policies on female staff in the organisation, specifically in the area of productivity which was brought on by the inclusivity strategy which evoked a sense of belonging in them and increased their productivity. This has led to an increase of women in leadership positions including heads of departments in not only the technical and engineering departments but also in the human resource management and finance departments.

### ***Improved Work-Life Balance***

Work-life balance pertains to the equilibrium between time and effort allocated to professional duties and other life commitments, particularly those involving family (Priya & Rani, 2022). The study discovered an enhancement in the work-life balance of employees following the adoption of gender-based strategies, specifically the inclusivity strategy. This initiative introduced paternity leave for fathers and extended the duration of leave for mothers, ensuring the necessary time off to manage family obligations while effectively attending to work responsibilities thereafter. This participant surmised that,

For instance, as it concerns leave beginning next month; we have instituted paternity leave and the increment of the time allotted to maternity leave to four months. **(KII/M/Gen X/HRM DPRT/senior manager/June 2021)**

IBEDC instituted paternity leave in response to male staff requests for similar concessions to those given to female staff after childbirth, aiming to improve work-life balance. Although the effects of this policy were not evident at the time of the study, it was expected to benefit workers by addressing their needs. The study's second objective examined the impact of HR gender-based policies on staff, revealing increased female productivity and improved work-life balance due to development and inclusivity strategies. However, these strategies predominantly focused on female staff, leading to biased outcomes. Consequently, while these policies aim to be gender-based, they inadvertently foster gender inequality within the organisation by favouring one gender especially when considering the gendered nature of both jobs. This points to the fact that gender equality policies should not just aim for creating a level field for female staff or giving them priority as the marginalised gender, but it should consider the nuances in specific professions like customer service, which is female-gendered and would usually and inadvertently house discriminatory elements towards male staff.

This section comprehensively discussed the research findings regarding the impact of HR gender-based policies on gender inequality within specific work departments at IBEDC (the organization). Data from 33 participants, garnered through in-depth and key informant

interviews across departments—technical and engineering, customer service, and human resource management—was examined. The study had two primary objectives. The first focused on evaluating staff understanding of gender-based policies within the organisation, encompassing knowledge, understanding and communication mediums used. The second objective centred on assessing the effects of these policies on staff members. Concerning staff awareness, the research revealed a significantly low level of knowledge regarding the gender-based strategies in IBEDC. Participants ranged from being entirely unaware of the policies to possessing only basic information, often showcasing a preference for female staff, potentially contributing to gender inequality against male employees. Additionally, some participants exhibited a lack of interest or buy-in, believing it was not their responsibility but that of HR managers to understand these policies, indicating a possible source of gender inequality within the organisation.

The study identified four gender-based strategies within IBEDC: recruitment, inclusivity, development and capacity building, and an anti-harassment policy. Recruitment strategies, like gender-neutral communication and gender-balanced panels, aimed at addressing biases in the hiring process. However, there were disparities in the attention devoted to male versus female staff within certain strategies, particularly evident in customer service, potentially perpetuating gender inequality. The developmental strategy aimed to empower female staff and encourage more women to pursue STEM careers, but it lacked a parallel initiative for males in the customer service profession, potentially perpetuating gender bias. The inclusivity strategy extended beyond recruitment to decision-making processes, introducing paternity leave and expunging gender-biased terminology, promoting a more inclusive work environment. Meanwhile, the anti-harassment policy while not directly gender-based, intersected with gender-related issues, indicating IBEDC's stance on gender equality.

Regarding the effects of these policies on staff, the study revealed increased female productivity and improved work-life balance, primarily resulting from the developmental and inclusivity strategies. However, as these strategies predominantly favoured female staff, the policies exhibited bias and failed to fully represent a "gender-based" approach, inadvertently fostering gender inequality within the organisation.

### **Theoretical discussion of findings**

The findings from the study at IBEDC align with Joan Acker's Gendered Organisation Theory, which posits that institutional practices often reinforce gender biases by embedding male normativity into organisational structures. The examination of HR gender-based policies at IBEDC revealed disparities and biases, confirming Acker's assertion that the historical absence and normative establishment of masculine behaviours perpetuate a gendered division of labour (Acker, 1990). The research highlighted a significant lack of awareness among IBEDC staff regarding gender-based strategies, with a prevailing perception that these policies favoured female staff while inadequately addressing male inclusivity. These findings support Acker's view that processes such as the division of labour, workplace interactions, and organisational logic contribute to gender inequalities (Acker, 1990). The lack of focus on male staff within certain strategies at IBEDC points to systemic bias in organisational policies, inadvertently reinforcing gender disparities.

Acker's theory on organisational logic perpetuating gender disparities is evident in the study's observations. The examination of IBEDC's policies showed how gender biases persist, particularly through the inadequate representation of male staff in developmental and inclusivity strategies. The absence of targeted initiatives for male staff suggests that the policies may not fully embody a gender-based approach, potentially perpetuating gender inequalities, as Acker suggested (Acker, 1990). Thus, IBEDC's HR gender-based policies, as evidenced in

this study, reflect Acker's perspective that organisational policies and practices, if not carefully considered, may inadvertently perpetuate gender biases. The findings underscore the necessity of reassessing HR policies to ensure they genuinely reflect gender-based principles, fostering an equitable and unbiased work environment.

### Conclusion and recommendations

This study examined the role of human resource gender-based policies on gender inequality at IBEDC. Despite various lenses applied to gender inequality over time, the issue persists. This research focused on HR policies related to gender equality in a male-dominated sector, specifically within the customer service and engineering departments of IBEDC. The study aimed to assess staff knowledge of gender-based policies and their effects on staff. Findings revealed contradictory opinions among staff about the existence and content of these policies. Some participants, including senior managers, were unaware of formal gender policies, while others mentioned informal practices favoring female staff. Clarity from senior managers, including the HR manager, indicated that formal gender equality policies did not exist, but gender-based strategies were embedded in HR practices. This low awareness and contradictory information suggest communication issues and a lack of mutual understanding between staff and HR managers, potentially sustaining gender inequality.

Confirmed gender-based strategies included development and capacity building, inclusivity, recruitment strategies, and an anti-harassment policy. Recruitment strategies aimed to address hiring biases through gender-neutral communication and balanced panels. However, disparities existed, with certain strategies favoring female staff, potentially perpetuating gender inequality. The development strategy aimed to empower female staff in STEM careers but lacked equivalent efforts for male staff. Inclusivity strategies, such as paternity leave and gender-neutral language, promoted a more inclusive environment. The anti-harassment policy, intersecting with gender issues, reflected IBEDC's stance on gender equality. The study showed that these strategies improved female productivity and work-life balance but indicated biased policies that favored female staff, potentially perpetuating gender inequality.

To address these issues, it is recommended that organisations and HR managers regularly communicate HR and organisational policies to staff, incorporating routine feedback through opinion polls, team discussions, and informal channels. Additionally, organisations should review their gender equality strategies to ensure they address all gender issues, avoiding policies that favour one gender over another. Future studies should expand in scale to gather comprehensive data from two gendered work organisations, and cross-reference participant responses with actual policy records.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1: Distribution of participants' sex, age classification, and department, duration of time with company, designation/role and highest qualification.**

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Female	15	45%
	Male	18	55%
Age classification	The Silent Generation (76-93)	1	3%
	Baby Boomers (57-75)	0	0%
	Generation X (41-56yrs old)	11	33%
	Gen Y/ Millennials (25-40yrs old)	18	55%
	Generation Z (18-24yrs old)	3	9%
Department	Customer service department (M, F)	14 (9,5)	42% (27%, 15%)
	Technical/engineering department (M, F)	18 (8,10)	55% (24%, 30%)
	Human resource department (M)	1	3%
Duration with company	1-5yrs	16	49%
	6-11yrs	15	45%
	12yrs and above	2	6%
Designation/Role	Head of department	3	9%
	Technical engineer	1	3%
	Assistant technical engineer	1	3%
	Senior level manager	2	6%
	Mid-level manager	5	15%
	Technical officer	9	27%
	Customer service officer	11	33%
	Customer service assistant	1	3%
Highest qualification	HND/ NCE (M & F)	9 (2,7)	27% (6%, 21%)
	BA/BSc (M & F)	17 (11,6)	52% (33%, 18%)
	PGD/Masters (M & F)	7 (5,2)	21% (15%, 6%)

**Source: Field Survey (2021)**

8/18/23, 12:03 PM

Gmail - RE: APPLICATION FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH



Patience Oben &lt;oben.patience@gmail.com&gt;

**RE: APPLICATION FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**

Adedayo Sule &lt;Adedayo.Sule@ibedc.com&gt;

Tue, May 18, 2021 at 1:10 PM

To: "oben.patience@gmail.com" &lt;oben.patience@gmail.com&gt;

Cc: Ola Ayodeji &lt;Ola.Ayodeji@ibedc.com&gt;, Jude Eguabor &lt;Jude.Eguabor@ibedc.com&gt;, Olabisi Daramola &lt;Olabisi.Daramola@ibedc.com&gt;, Bolaji Balogun &lt;Bolaji.Balogun@ibedc.com&gt;, Daniel Iyoha-Ojie &lt;daniel.ojie@ibedc.com&gt;

Dear Patience,

Your letter dated 30<sup>th</sup> April 2021 on the above subject refers.

Kindly be informed that IBEDC cannot release the requested list and details of its employees as it is against the Nigerian Data Protection Regulation. However, we can provide the numbers of staff in the required departments in terms of male to female ratio if it would be helpful. Please let us know.

At your discretion, you can contact any staff for the required interview but it should be noted that this is not done on behalf of IBEDC.

Should you required further assistance, kindly contact Mr. Daniel Iyoha-Ojie (via [daniel.ojie@ibedc.com](mailto:daniel.ojie@ibedc.com) or 08188146460) who is championing Gender Equality related programmes in IBEDC.

Wishing you all the best with your research.

Kind regards,

**Engr. Adedayo SULE****Lead, Infrastructural Support Projects****Business Transformation & Strategy Division**

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Ibadan Electricity Distribution Company

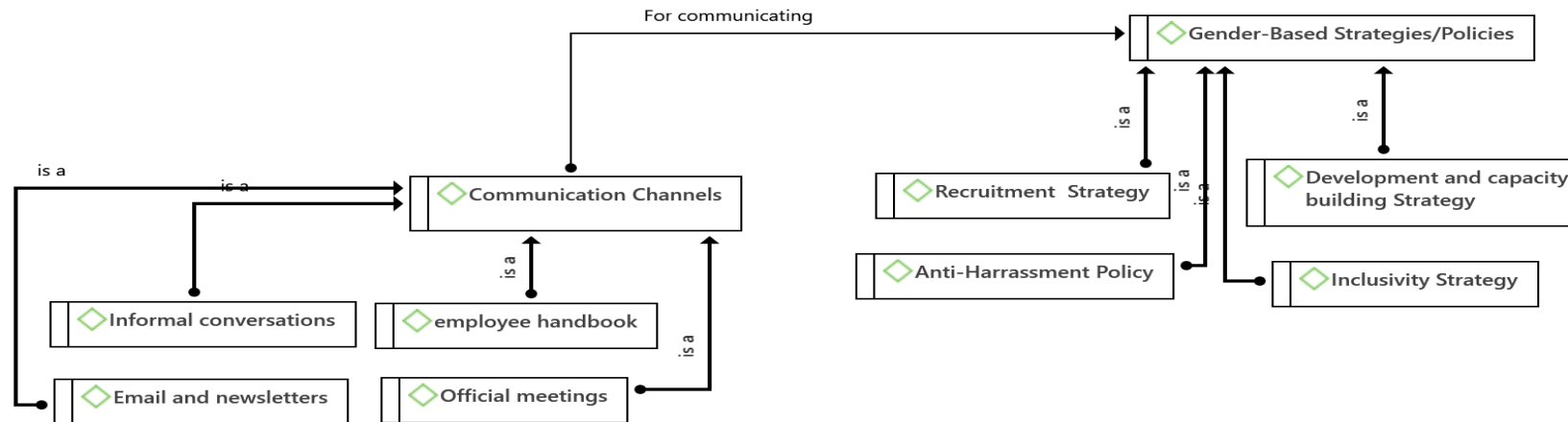
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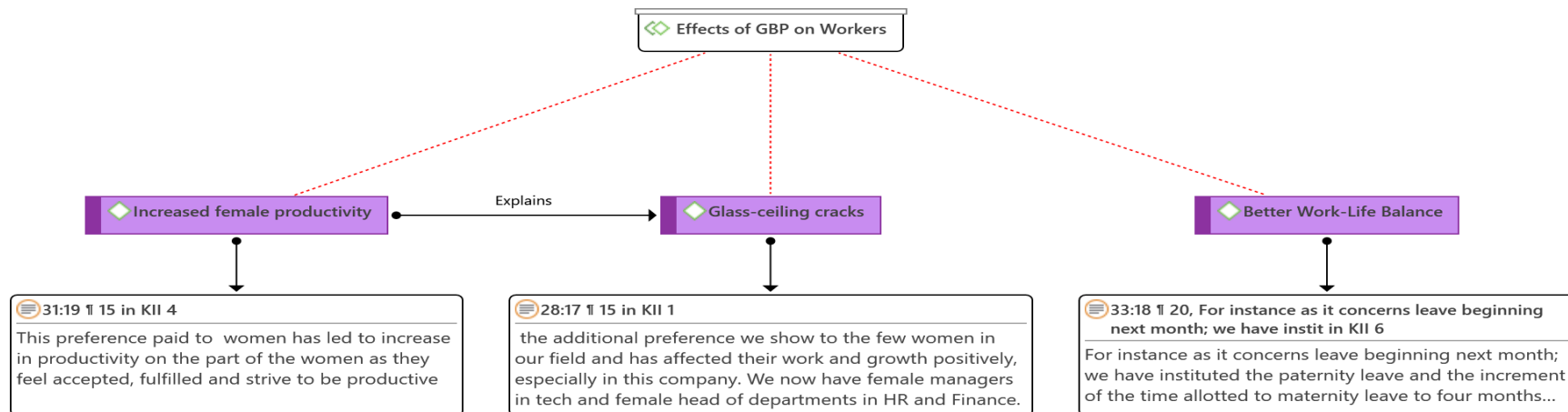
**Figure 1: A picture of the email, permitting the researcher to conduct the research in IBEDC**

**Source: Field survey (2021)**



**Figure 2: Showing the Gender-based Strategies and their Communication Channels in IBEDC**

Source: Field Survey (2021)



**Figure 3: Showing the Effects of Gender-based Policies on Staff of IBEDC**

Source: Field Survey (2021)